

The way forward for education workers after Ontario's provincial election

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Hundreds of thousands of Ontario teachers and education workers have confronted savage cuts to public education budgets, real-terms pay cuts, and a ruthless profits-before-lives pandemic policy during the first term of Doug Ford's hard-right Progressive Conservative government. Coming after decades of austerity and attacks on workers' rights implemented by successive NDP, Liberal, and Conservative provincial governments, with the complicity of the trade unions, these policies have reduced Ontario's public education system to a shambles.

One measure of this is the staggering \$14 billion backlog in school repairs.

Educators find themselves hamstrung by a dearth of resources and support, and burgeoning class sizes. At the beginning of the current school year, when the Ford government recklessly reopened the province's schools amid the pandemic's fourth wave, parents shared widespread reports of class sizes of up to 38 and even 40 students under the hashtag #UnsafeSeptember2021. The maximum secondary school class size is supposed to be 23.

Educators also must contend with a myriad of social problems that are impacting schools on a daily basis, because capitalist society is fraying and becoming increasingly brutal and because governments have cut spending on social services to the bone. Food insecurity, the growth of homelessness, and rising gang violence to name just a few are placing almost insurmountable demands on educators seeking to encourage young people to learn and prepare them for the future. Frustrated by a political establishment and social order that don't value them and frequently overwhelmed by the demands placed on them, teachers are leaving the profession in droves.

The Ford government, in its first full budget in early 2019, announced sweeping cuts to education, including the elimination of 10,000 teaching positions, cuts to school maintenance spending, and regressive changes to post-secondary funding.

Later the same year, the Ford government passed Bill 124, which capped public sector pay increases to just 1 percent per year for three years. Consequently, teachers, caretakers, administrative staff, and other education workers have suffered a further decline in their real-terms pay, coming on the heels of years of "wage restraint."

Inflation—which has risen steadily over the past year—has been exacerbated by the US/NATO-provoked proxy war in Ukraine, making Bill 124's bite ever larger. Across Canada, inflation is now officially pegged at 6.8 percent, although prices for essentials

like food, housing and gas are rising even more rapidly.

All of Ontario's mainstream political parties have placed educators, school pupils and their families at risk during the pandemic. All supported the ruling class's profits-before-lives back-to-work/back-to-school policy. The union-backed NDP coupled timid criticisms of the government for not reducing class sizes and investing more in proper ventilation with attacks on it from the right for not more aggressively reopening schools amidst successive waves of mass infection and death.

Pandemic school closures were only implemented as a last resort, when hospitals were on the verge of collapse due to the surge in COVID-19 patients. With the support of the teacher unions, Ford's Tories have kept Ontario "open for business" by pursuing a policy of mass infection for education workers, students, and their families. Schools were reduced to the status of holding pens where kids were deposited in order to ensure that their parents were freed from childcare obligations and could churn out profits for the corporate elite. The result of this homicidal policy has been over 13,200 official COVID-19 deaths in Ontario, hundreds of thousands of cases of Long COVID, and a backlog of more than 1 million surgeries.

The Ford government's abandonment of all mandatory anti-COVID public health measures was made possible by the active support and duplicity of the federal Liberal government, supported by the NDP, and the education unions. They all capitulated to the demands of the far-right Freedom Convoy—in essence turning public health into a matter of personal choice. This included abolishing mask mandates and other mitigation measures in schools.

When students and staff returned to Ontario's schools after the March Break, they were no longer required to wear a mask to protect the health of students and staff around them. This predictably produced an explosion of COVID transmission driven by the extremely contagious BA.2 Omicron variant. Meanwhile, governments of all political stripes across Canada abandoned tracking COVID-19 cases through PCR testing, often limiting tests to "vulnerable" people and "severe" cases. This made it impossible for the public to track the spread of the virus and thereby follow the authorities' cynical exhortation that they take "personal responsibility" for managing COVID risk.

The election campaign, with its phony promises and posturing, has been marked by indifference to the economic suffering of workers, and the life and death issues arising from a negligent and

mercenary pandemic policy. Ford kicked it off in late April with his government's 2022 "election budget." Behind a smokescreen of repackaged infrastructure spending promises, the budget outlined plans to impose significant real-terms per-capita spending cuts for education and health care in the years to come. The budget's fine print also revealed that in the just-completed 2021-22 fiscal year, public school spending had been reduced by \$1.3 billion from what was originally budgeted. Assistance for post-secondary students was \$1 billion below its level in the 2018-19 year, and the overall post-secondary budget was cut by over \$680 million.

Teachers and education workers wondering how it is possible that Ford, according to all the opinion polls, is set to win a second term in office despite this vicious anti-worker record should examine the duplicitous role played by the trade unions.

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF), Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO), Unifor and the other major unions have systematically suppressed all worker opposition to the Ford government's austerity agenda, telling their members that they should wait to elect a "progressive" government in 2022.

A critical role in allowing Bill 124 to come into force unopposed was played by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). It sabotaged a planned strike by tens of thousands of education support staff at the 11th hour in October 2019 and rammed through a concessions-filled contract that included the 1 percent wage cap, even though Bill 124 would not come into force until the following month.

When a strike by over 200,000 teachers shook the province in February 2020—a strike that was only called after months of pressure from rank-and-file workers—the unions responded by calling off all further job action for fear that the growing mass movement of workers could get out of their control. They then seized on the emergence of the pandemic to ram through rotten contracts based on Bill 124's pay cap in the name of "pulling together" to fight COVID.

The union bureaucrats are having a hard time selling education workers the lie that a Liberal or NDP-led government would offer a "progressive" alternative to one headed by the erstwhile Trump enthusiast Ford.

The Liberals have no political leg to stand on. Ontario's ruling party for the 15 years prior to Ford's election in 2018, they were no less anti-worker than their Conservative successors. The Liberals implemented an austerity agenda that saw education spending fall year after year and targeted teachers with a Bill 124-type wage-cutting law, Bill 115.

Between 2011 and 2014, the NDP propped up the Liberals, who had been reduced to a minority at Queen's Park and supported their austerity budgets. The Liberal governments of Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne—elected with the open support of the teacher union-supported Working Families Coalition—imposed contracts that kept education workers' pay checks below inflation and forced workers to increase their contributions to pensions and benefits, further reducing their take home pay. Moreover, the Liberals repeatedly used back-to-work legislation to break strikes, including by teachers in 2015.

Just as they have sabotaged education workers' struggles against budget cuts and wage austerity, so the unions have been missing in action when it comes to protecting workers' health and lives during the more than two-year and still ongoing pandemic.

The teacher unions and CUPE ruled out all collective action against dangerous working conditions as "illegal" under the collective bargaining regime, from which they draw their handsome six-figure salaries and close working relations with government ministers and school administrators. The unions forced education workers who didn't feel safe working in COVID-stricken schools to file individual work refusals with the pro-employer labor relations board. The whole process was a sham designed to keep workers isolated, divided, and demoralized.

No provincial political party or trade union fights for well-funded, safe schools and substantial wage increases for workers. The election, whatever party or parties forms the government, will not bring progressive change for workers in Ontario.

Workers must break out of the strait jacket of electoral politics and take political matters into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees in every workplace, completely independent of the capitalist parties and corporatist trade union apparatuses. These committees should formulate demands based on what educators, students, and the public education system as a whole urgently require, including above-inflation pay increases to make good for decades of wage stagnation, billions of dollars in additional funding for school buildings and education materials, and a Zero COVID strategy to put a halt to mass infections in schools and other workplaces.

These demands necessitate a political struggle against the entire political establishment and its paymasters in the financial oligarchy that currently hold sway over all aspects of social and economic life. We encourage all educators, support staff, parents, and other workers wishing to take forward this struggle to contact and help build the Cross-Canada Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee by emailing cersc.cspfb@gmail.com.



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